

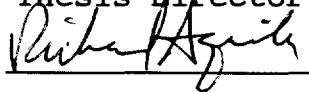
Alternative Ideas:
Post-Modern Music as a Critique of American Society

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Richard Aziz", is written over a horizontal line.

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Popular music is a form of creative expression. It can be trite and meaningless or emotional and passionate, formulaic and unoriginal or refreshing and revolutionary. Since the 1960s, rock music has been considered an art form,¹ and just as classical music, literature and theatre can evoke feelings and express opinions, popular music too can be a vehicle for personal statements and social criticism. Ever since the 1960s when groups like the Beatles and Rolling Stones were saying something to their audience, much rock music, though not all, has had meaningful and insightful lyrics. 'Alternative' music is especially dependent on lyrical content as its backbone. Certainly the music itself is very important as well, but at the same time this type of music is replete with social observations which are conveyed by the words. Also called post-modern, this kind of music is best defined in the context of its principal audience.

What is now termed 'alternative' is an outgrowth of the punk/new wave movement of the late 1970s, a movement that was undeniably working-class in its roots. Punk surfaced in England as a challenge to the hegemonic ruling-class. The music represented the percipience of lower-class youths, challenged the capitalist control of music, and suggested new sounds, forms and meaning.² Punk was different in how it was made and what it portrayed, and groups such as the Clash and the Sex Pistols sang angry songs about poverty, inequality, helplessness and alienation. Far off the mainstream of Top 40 rock and pop, this

'new wave' moved away from the consensus and spoke to a subculture concerned with the never-ending struggle between those who have power and those who do not.³ A goal of punk was to increase youth and working-class consciousness, and this was accomplished through the political and social lyrics as well as the raw and rebellious power of the music.⁴ Punk/new wave music affected a subculture that included urban young, students, ethnic groups, radical professionals, gays, and people concerned about protest and survival.⁵

In the early 1980s, because it was no longer new, the term 'new wave' lost its significance, and 'alternative' became a new name for this type of music. But despite the new title, alternative music in its lyrical content has remained essentially the same, critiquing society and depicting the causes and effects of social and political inequality. Although much post-modern music is British, it reaches an American subculture that is much the same as the aforementioned British group. Especially affected are students and radicals, particularly people with deep social concern. In the 1960s, a different kind of music appealed to a similar subculture of youths who believed in individualism and opposed white middle-class values. After showing how alternative music critiques American society, I will argue that this music affects a modern youth subculture in much the same way as protest music in the 60s related to the youth culture of that era.

Punk and new wave music and the alternative style that

followed can be used to reflect the United States of the last 15 years. More precisely, post-modern music points out what it perceives as the ills of society. The conservative policies of Reagan and other politicians, including military ideology, supply-side economics, and foreign intervention, are often criticized by alternative artists. In addition, economic problems such as poverty, unemployment, and social inequality, are frequently addressed in this music. Furthermore, racism, capitalism and consumerism are attacked, and conformity and apathy are seen as self-perpetuating problems that must be overcome in order for things to improve. Post-modern music serves as a critique of American society and attempts to increase awareness so that perhaps these problems may one day be resolved.

At the time the punk/new wave movement was gaining momentum in England and America, the United States was experiencing a resurgence of conservatism. In the late 1970s, people were starting to become skeptical about the worth of the welfare state, and there was more and more support for a return to traditional family values.⁶ Riding the tide of this right-wing revival, Ronald Reagan won the 1980 election and began instituting new conservative policies while continuing the existing ones. Reagan was popular largely due to the sense of patriotism he instilled in many Americans. He felt the United States needed to reassert its position as a strong and influential nation. To accomplish this, Reagan continued meddling U.S. intervention in many small countries and advocated

a massive nuclear build-up to protect the country from the so-called evil Soviets. Because of his conservative policies, Reagan became a target of many alternative bands. His military mentality resulted in his reputation as a cowboy, and the post-modern band Big Audio Dynamite makes reference to this in the song 'Bad': "Reagan won in a landslide, which brings us back to rawhide."⁷ Another group, the Silencers, voice a similar concern about Reagan's defense objectives: "Go go Ronnie go/Detonate and blow us away."⁸

Much of Reagan's popularity was due to his speaking ability and personality. In his rhetoric, Reagan was very adept at manipulating the public by blurring "many lines on some of the great questions of American politics."⁹ Having been an actor, Reagan used this skill in his projection of patriotism, optimism and traditional values;¹⁰ he was charming and likable and his performing talents garnered many votes and much public support. In 'Sweethearts,' the alternative group Camper Van Beethoven is troubled by what they perceive as a simple-minded man who is "living in some B-movie," where "the lines are so clearly drawn."¹¹ The Talking Heads are similarly doubtful about the President's state of mind. In 'Making Flippy Floppy,' David Byrne exclaims "Our president's crazy/Did you here what he said?", referring to Reagan's flippant comment about bombing the Soviets.¹² Though his rhetoric appealed to many Americans, these post-modern musicians appear not to be fooled.

Reagan's popularity declined toward the end of his second

term in large part due to the corruption that plagued his administration. Although the Iran-Contra affair was the most significant scandal, it was not the only unethical governmental action of the decade by any means. In fact, even before the Iran-Contra ordeal, almost 100 senior officials had been charged with severe ethical violations in what was perhaps the most corrupt administration of the 20th century.¹³ In the most serious scandal, the United States government illegally and unconstitutionally sold arms to Iran in exchange for hostages and then diverted the funds to the contras in Nicaragua. Although the President obviously was involved with the goings-on behind the scenes, he was never impeached or convicted of any crime. He did not, however, escape completely unscathed as his image has been diminished significantly in the eyes of many Americans. So, Reagan's presidency was filled with ups and downs, but ultimately even his own rhetoric could not save him from looking awkward and disoriented in the Iran-Contra trials, perhaps a fitting end to a presidency whose epitaph should read, "I don't remember."

The scandal that tarnished Reagan's tenure as president was a result of his obsession with intervention. Since even before the Reagan years, the United States has practiced imperialism in many foreign nations in attempting to promote capitalism and democracy and thwart the threat of communism. In the early 1970s, both Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon felt that the United States government knew what was best for everyone, and the result was the imposition of capitalism and democracy on many

small countries.¹⁴ As early as 1977, the Clash were voicing their opposition to this kind of imperialism. 'I'm so bored with the U.S.A.' is about the never-ending, meddlesome U.S. foreign policy: "Those killers in America work seven days a week."¹⁵ The Talking Heads' 'Blind' is a report from a country occupied by American forces that has been "torn all apart/All in the name of democracy."¹⁶

Despite protest from our allies and much internal criticism, this kind of intervention continued under Reagan.¹⁷ In El Salvador, the U.S. government supported a right-wing government, ruled by a small land-rich elite notorious for poor human rights, against the popular resistance movement. Between 1979 and 1987, over 600,000 people were killed in a country with only four million citizens. Those slain included innocent landowners, peasants and American missionaries, and much of the killing was done by the uncontrollable right-wing 'death squads.'¹⁸

The situation was reversed in Nicaragua where our government was opposed to the Sandinistas, and thus trained and armed counterrevolutionaries called contras in an effort to oust this leftist regime.¹⁹ This ongoing battle has cost 9000 lives and resulted in the destruction of farms, schools, homes and health clinics among other things.²⁰ Even before many Americans knew much of what was going on there, the Clash titled an album Sandinista! in 1980 in protest of the American involvement. This recording includes songs dealing with a wide variety of political topics, particularly the hands-on foreign policy of the United

States.

In Grenada, the White House used the flimsy premise of the island's strategic value to Cuba and the Soviet Union as justification for the invasion of this tiny, defenseless nation. The United States believed that Russian weapons were located in Grenada that were to be used for military subjugation of the surrounding regions. What was discovered was arms enough to equip only 2000 soldiers, clearly not a force capable of Caribbean domination.²¹ In 'Peace in Our Time,' Elvis Costello questions Reagan's concern over "just another tiny island when he's got the whole world in his hands."²²

Another element of Reagan's military scheme has been increased defense spending and consequently the mounting concern about nuclear war. When Reagan took office, he was extremely anti-communist and even called the Soviet Union the evil empire. Reagan felt Russia was responsible for troubles in the Third World, and said that they were ready "to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat" to spread communism.²³ This rhetoric raised Cold War tensions, and alternative artists expressed anxiety about U.S.-Soviet relations and wrote music about the the need for peace. Sting, in a song called 'Russians,' discusses the Cold War and points out that both sides are at fault: "There is no monopoly of common sense/On either side of the political fence." Sting criticizes the aggressive Soviet rhetoric of Krushchev and the protection philosophy of the United States, reasoning that there would be no winners in a nuclear war.²⁴ The Alarm

illustrates fear of war and hope for peace in 'Absolute Reality,' singing "you may be afraid in this power mad age/But there's one thing we all must find/Peace in our time."²⁵ Elvis Costello sings about going through life noticing all the problems and the fighting and asks "what's so funny 'bout peace, love and understanding?" in the song by the same name.²⁶ Clearly, anti-Soviet rhetoric and the subsequent heightening of Cold War tensions alarmed these musicians.

This view of a malevolent Soviet Union, reminiscent of the view of monolithic communism evident in the 1950s and 60s, prompted the need for a massive nuclear build-up. Reagan proposed an eight-year, 2.3 trillion dollar military budget, and most of it was approved by Congress. In 1985, it was estimated that the U.S. was spending 28 million dollars every hour of every day on defense.²⁷ To understand the sheer magnitude of these figures, compare the 1988 defense spending (282 billion) with the combined money spent on housing, health care, education and the environment (203 billion).²⁸ This exorbitant military spending has been addressed in much post-modern music. In 'Put Down That Weapon,' Midnight Oil cautions that nuclear reductions are necessary and sings about the urgency of the problem. Peter Garrett suggests that nuclear weapons do not insure freedom but instead increase the likelihood of destruction. He also tells the superpowers that "you must be crazy if you think you're strong."²⁹ R.E.M.'s Michael Stipe warns in 'Hyena' that "the only thing to fear is fearlessness/The bigger the weapon the

greater the fear." This song seems to be implying that everyone must recognize and be worried about the danger of nuclear weapons.³⁰

The Star Wars program, a technological innovation that if perfected would be capable of destroying Soviet warheads in mid-air, is the subject of a song by INXS. 'Guns in the Sky' suggests that Star Wars is not a peaceful solution; singer Michael Hutchence goes so far to say he wishes "we could stop the world and let off all the fools and let them go live with their guns in the sky."³¹

The fear of nuclear aftermath is expressed in 'Everyday is Like Sunday' by Morrissey. This song is about a town that was not bombed but is feeling the effects of the radiation and consequently "every day is silent and grey." In fact, the conditions are so bad that Morrissey pleads "come! come! come-nuclear bomb!" in order to put the suffering people out of their misery.³² Because the magnitude of possible destruction due to nuclear war cannot be exaggerated, this is an issue that is prevalent in many alternative albums.

On the domestic front, Reagan believed in supply-side economics and adamantly supported capitalism with minimal government intervention. 'Reaganomics' required tax cuts for corporations and the rich to stimulate savings and investment, and this is exactly what occurred with the largest tax cut in U.S. history of 750 billion dollars in 1981. In theory, this would create new jobs, money and prosperity that would 'trickle

down' to the lower classes.³³ However, with the substantial cuts in social programs such as housing, Medicare, and employment, it is apparent that there was very little trickling as the gap between the rich and the poor widened under Reagan.³⁴ Peter Garrett of Midnight Oil echoes doubts about the positive effects of big business on the common man in 'The Dead Heart': "Mining companies, pastoral companies, uranium companies, collected companies/Got more rights than people, got more say than people."³⁵

This support of big business is also criticized because of the treatment of blue-collar workers by corporate executives and bosses. In 'Bow Down,' the Housemartins describe a young man entering the business world who is manipulated by the powerful executives. This lower employee notices the "evil smiles" of corrupt managers who are so concerned about getting ahead that they will do anything, including using this new worker. He is described as helpless in the world of corporate giants: "He couldn't move his mouth to speak/And I could bend him into any shape I wanted him to be."³⁶ The Royal Crescent Mob also is skeptical about the businessman's concern for the ordinary employee in 'Corporation Enema.' This song describes a man who works for an uncaring boss. Despite working hard, he gets no raises, is forced to work overtime and has little hope for improvement: "There's not a thing I can do/I'm being used."³⁷

The morality of the laissez-faire capitalist system itself is questioned in some circles. Robert Lekachman argues that

capitalism's goal is to selfishly maximize profit and consequently that there is no connection between morality and capitalism. He goes on to argue that unregulated capitalism often results in poorly made and sometimes harmful products. Indeed, after executives at Ford discovered how dangerous Pintos were, they calculated that the amount they would pay in probable lawsuits was less than the cost of correcting the problem, and so they did nothing.³⁸ This ruthless, make-money-at-any-cost attitude is criticized by R.E.M. in the song 'Exhuming McCarthy,' so-titled because of the continuation of McCarthy-like ideologies even into the 80s: "You're sharpening stones, walking on coals, to improve your business acumen."³⁹ Depeche Mode also doubts the morality of capitalism in the song 'Everything Counts.' This song describes insincere, corpulent businessmen who will stop at nothing to make a deal: "Picture it now, see just how/The lies and deceit gained a little more power."⁴⁰

Another result of capitalism is that it results in too much power in the hands of the affluent. Unequally distributed wealth results in unequally distributed political power, and uneven economic power is more severe in America than any other advanced industrial nation in the world.⁴¹ The Clash in 1976 wrote a song about the social inequality in England, but it is as relevant to Americans as anyone. In 'White Riot,' Joe Strummer angrily declares that "all the power is in the hands of the people rich enough to buy it."⁴² In 'Begin the Begin,' R.E.M. also notes this inequality, claiming that "life's rich demand creates supply

in the hands of the power/The only vote that matters."⁴³

Some of the unfortunate results of capitalism and also 'Reaganomics' have been the widening gulf between the rich and the poor and the perpetuation of poverty and unemployment in America. Reagan's tax cuts for the wealthy have translated to the highest disparity between the affluent and the destitute since World War II.⁴⁴ Since 1978, the middle class has been shrinking as the distribution of income in the U.S. has polarized.⁴⁵ Love and Rockets discuss the difficulty of social mobility on their Earth, Sun, Moon album: "When you're down it's a long way up, when you're up it's a long way down/It's all the same thing, no new tale to tell."⁴⁶ In 'Nowhere Fast,' the Smiths discuss social inequality from the viewpoint of a bitter man on the lower end of the economic ladder. Lead singer Morrissey sarcastically chants "the poor and the needy are selfish and greedy"⁴⁷ reflecting the intolerance of welfare by some people, particularly those who have money.

Poverty is another serious problem in the United States. In 1988, almost 32 million people, or 13 percent of the population, were poor.⁴⁸ Perhaps more shocking is that twenty percent of American children live below the poverty line.⁴⁹ Of the poor, almost ten million are rural citizens, and they receive less attention than the smaller group of urban homeless.⁵⁰ The working poor, employed persons living below the poverty line, are hidden and their numbers are increasing rapidly.⁵¹ UB40 sings about the misfortune of poverty in the song 'The Prisoner':

"Poverty has turned him to crime/A burning, bitter taste of irony/A prisoner in the land of the free."⁵² The Clash also sympathize with poor in 'Armageddon Time,' a song that expresses the hopelessness of poverty: "A lot of people won't get no supper tonight/A lot of people won't get no justice tonight."⁵³

Although these are English groups dealing with poverty in England, these songs can be applied to the American poor as well and the socially conscious subculture that listens to alternative music in the U.S. can relate to these concerns.

In addition to poverty, unemployment has remained a constant problem throughout the last decade. In 1982, unemployment reached a staggering 10.1 percent, including 19.8 percent for blacks and 15.6 for industrial workers. White collar unemployment was just 4.8 percent, further evidence of the ever-increasing gulf between the upper and lower classes.⁵⁴ Although it dropped to and stayed around seven percent for the remainder of Reagan's presidency, this relatively high figure in a time of sustained economic expansion can be seen as another failure of Reaganomics.⁵⁵ Once again, British bands' concerns about unemployment in their own country affects some Americans as the music can be used to reflect the jobless situation in the United States. The Clash began questioning the availability of 'Career Opportunities' in 1977, complaining "they said I better take anything they got...Career opportunities, the ones that never knock."⁵⁶ In 1981, as the unemployment figure was approaching ten percent in the U.S., UB40 wrote about the 'One in Ten,' "a

statistical reminder of a world that doesn't care."⁵⁷

Another outgrowth of Reagan's quest for a better economy were lax environmental laws which have contributed significantly to growing ecological concerns. The President believed that weakened environmental enforcement was necessary to maximize business profits thereby stimulating growth and prosperity. On their album Starfish, the Church expressed disgust at sacrificing nature for growth in 'Destination': "Our elements are burnt out, our beasts have been mistreated/I tell you it's the only way we'll get this road completed."⁵⁸ Secretary of the Interior James Watt, a proponent of minimal regulation, was a key figure in easing restrictions on corporations as his objective was to open federal lands for mining, drilling and developing. Another Reagan appointee, Thomas Auchter, was named to head the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) even though he had collected forty-eight OSHA violations since 1972. As a result, inspections went down 16 percent and penalties decreased by 40 percent in the president's first six months of office.⁵⁹ R.E.M. are opposed to this kind of non-regulation and contend that we need to "put our heads together and start a new country up" in the environmentalist anthem 'Cuyahoga.' In this song about a river in Ohio, Michael Stipe describes a place where he used to swim, walk and enjoy the scenery but now cannot because of pollution that has ruined the surrounding area.⁶⁰

This weakened enforcement has caused the worsening of some already serious environmental problems. The alleged greenhouse

effect, caused by carbon-dioxide, is supposedly warming the earth and may lead to the melting of the polar ice caps.⁶¹ Also dangerous are the chloroflourocarbons (CFCs) that are found in styrofoam cups and freon and which are causing the thinning of the earth's ozone layer. One consequence of this is increased ultraviolet radiation that could increase the incidence of skin cancer and could upset plant growth and photosynthesis thus disrupting the foundation of the food chain.⁶² Midnight Oil is an Australian band that is very disturbed about what is happening to the environment; their most recent album Blue Sky Mining is full of ecological concern. In 'River Runs Red,' Peter Garrett sings "so you cut all the tall trees down/You poisoned the sky and the sea." He goes on to hope that "there must be one place left in the world where the mountains meet the sea...where the water's real and clean" in 'Antarctica.'⁶³

Acid rain is another serious problem that has many detrimental effects. Among these are the pollution of lakes, streams and forests and the danger to fish and wildlife. The sulfur dioxide emitted from the burning of fossil fuels is the major cause of acid rain, and a side effect of this pollutant gas is decreased resistance to respiratory disease.⁶⁴ R.E.M. worries about acid rain in 'Fall on Me,' voicing dissatisfaction about the construction of factories that let off dangerous pollutants: "There's a progress we have found, a way to talk around the problems/Buildings towered, foresight isn't anything at all." This criticism is related to the business-before-safety mentality

of the Reagan administration: "Buy the sky and sell the sky and bleed the sky and tell the sky 'don't fall on me.'"

In spite of these serious environmental problems, many Americans are too concerned with themselves, as consumerism and materialism have been prevalent in the U.S. over the past 15 years. The 1970s was labeled "The Me Decade" by Tom Wolfe implying that most Americans were more worried about themselves than anything else.⁶⁵ In The Culture of Narcissism (1979), Christopher Lasch echoes similar sentiments accusing people of being self-indulgent and apathetic.⁶⁶ In the 1980s, this narcissism has continued and manifests itself in consumerism and greed. Two recent studies illustrate the American obsession with money. A 1987 survey of college freshman indicated that 75 percent of those polled felt that being financially well-off is an essential goal while less than 40 percent feel a meaningful philosophy of life is important.⁶⁷ During the 1984 election campaign, a Washington Post poll revealed that of the voters polled who felt electing Mondale would ensure government programs were fair to all while electing Reagan would result in them being personally better off financially, seventy-one percent would support Reagan.⁶⁸ Mick Jones, formerly of the Clash and presently with Big Audio Dynamite, disapproves of this avarice in 'Bad': "attitudes of some would say 'I've got money I'm okay,' and that's bad!"⁶⁹

The rise of the yuppie is another example of greed and consumerism in the 1980s. Yuppies, or 'young urban

professionals,' are characterized by an inordinate desire for wealth and the ability to raise consumerism to an art form. They have to have the newest, latest and often most gratuitous things (take 'the ultimate precision yo-yo' from The Sharper Image for a mere 39 dollars).⁷⁰ To yuppies, narcissism is both natural and commendable, and these Americans represent "a culture of consumption epitomized by the bumper sticker 'Born to Shop.'" ⁷¹ 'Decline and Fall' by Flesh for Lulu is about the American yearning for wealth and status, describing excessive, greedy individuals who can "keep all the things that (they) can keep/that (they) will never need." Obsession with appearance is also noted: "You can have fine clothes, take you where you wanna go go go/You can have a real fine home, drowning in suburbia."⁷² Depeche mode depicts a competitive society of "grabbing hands (that) grab all they can/All for themselves."⁷³ In 'Never Stop,' Echo and the Bunnymen ask "is that the only thing you care about?/Splitting up the money and share it out."⁷⁴ These post-modern musicians seemed concerned with the selfishness that capitalism encourages and perpetuates.

Another problem in the United States is apathy. This is most concretely manifested in the political indifference reflected by low voting turn-outs. For example, in the 1988 presidential election, only 57.4 percent of the voting population cast their ballots.⁷⁵ This lack of expression by Americans bothers R.E.M., who argue that silence means consent in 'Begin the Begin': "silence means security/Silence means approval."⁷⁶

In comparison with other nations around the world, it is apparent just how torpid many U.S. citizens are. In most other developed nations, the voter response was far more substantial; Australia (94% in 1984), Britain (73% in 1983) and Sweden (90% in 1986) were among those countries whose people appeared to care more.⁷⁷ But still, British voting vigor does not impress the socialist band the Housemartins who sing many songs indicting apathy. One such composition, 'Sitting on a Fence,' is about a man who is confused about his political position and therefore decides to be reticent. He "sees both sides of both sides" and "swings from poll to poll"; the result is he decides not to voice his opinion. "But the real problem with this man is he says he can't when he can," sings P.d. Heaton about this person.⁷⁸ If the British artists are concerned about apathy when a higher proportion of people vote in their country than in the U.S., then perhaps we as Americans should re-evaluate our political positions and hit the booths come election time.

Since the future of the United States is in the hands of politicians, it is a wonder that people are apathetic. From a working-class viewpoint, one explanation is that less fortunate people often feel that regardless of their vote, the results will not change.⁷⁹ People who are wealthy, on the other hand, eschew voting for a different reason: complacency. Particularly considering the narcissism that exists in America, many people see no need for change since they are satisfied with their lives and may deem voting a waste of time. This attitude is analyzed

in the Housemartins' 'The People Who Grinned Themselves to Death,' a song about a complacent society whose citizens "smiled so much they failed to take a breath" and chose not to notice the poor and starving families among them.⁸⁰

Related to the presence of apathy in the United States is the problem of conformity. Dating back to the political philosophy of John Locke, conformity in politics has been a common idea. People conform rather than voice dissenting opinions, for fear of rejection.⁸¹ The Talking Heads' David Byrne addresses this political submission in 'The Democratic Circus': "When they're asking for volunteers, we'll be the first ones aboard/And when the ringmaster calls our names, we'll be the first ones to go."⁸² In the 1940s, David Reisman's The Lonely Crowd argued that Americans shifted from independent individuals to conformists who submit to the majority.⁸³ This lack of individual thought is exemplified in 'The Puppet' by Echo and the Bunnymen. This alternative band refers to an obsequious majority in this song: "We are the salt of the earth and we know what to say/We are the salt of the earth and we know our place."⁸⁴ The Cure also questions conformity in the appropriately titled 'Jumping Someone Else's Train': "Don't say what you mean, it might spoil your face/If you walk in a crowd you won't leave any trace."⁸⁵

More recently, Murray Edelman contends in Political Language that children are brought up doubting their competence and sagacity in dealing with complex or technical issues, and the

result is conformity. People think they are not capable of understanding certain things and then tend to go along with either the majority or an alleged expert.⁸⁶ "Monkey see monkey do," sings David Byrne in 'The Facts of Life,' a song that also claims that "we are programmed happy little children."⁸⁷ Edelman goes on to argue that most people are interested in other things more than in politics while at the same time understand the importance of political decisions. This translates into a society eager to accept the policies and opinions of politicians who appear knowledgeable and have the capacity to act.⁸⁸ Once again, it is the Housemartins who offer a searing indictment of conformity in the song 'Sheep,' describing a majority who has "never questioned anything, ...never disagreed/Sometimes I think they must have wool in their ears."⁸⁹

Although the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s brought blacks closer to equality, racism still exists in America. In addition to the general prejudice of some people, which may never go away completely, there are still some more extreme cases of racism troubling blacks. One problem throughout America has been the revival of racism on college campuses. For example, at the University of Michigan, fliers were distributed declaring "open hunting season on jigaboos and porch monkeys."⁹⁰ In Madison, a fraternity at the University of Wisconsin recently held a slave auction. After being suspended, the president of the fraternity told a protester that "it wasn't intended to be racist."⁹¹ Incidents such as these make one wonder how far civil

rights has come when bigotry still exists on the campuses of reputable universities. The Special A.K.A., a reggae-influenced alternative group, stress the immorality of racism in 'Racist Friend': "If you have a racist friend/Now is the time for your friendship to end."⁹² Be it your mother, father or brother, this group is so strongly against prejudice that they encourage disassociation with any racist. Depeche Mode call for understanding in 'People are People,' asking why people who are different colors and different creeds should get along so badly. Unfair racist prejudgement is exemplified in one particular verse: "It's obvious you hate me though I've done nothing wrong/I haven't even met you so what could I have done."⁹³

Perhaps more shocking than the resurgence of racism at colleges is that the blatantly racist Klu Klux Klan still exists in the United States. An incident involving the KKK in 1979 in Greensboro, North Carolina shows that not only does the Klan still exist but it is capable of violence. Indeed, four people were killed when Klansmen opened fire on a group of peaceful anti-Klan marchers.⁹⁴ This event prompted Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark (OMD) to write the song '88 Seconds in Greensboro' about the ongoing racial tensions: "Times are changing/But not on our street."⁹⁵

Apartheid, though not located in the United States, is nevertheless a constant reminder of the moral atrocity of racism and has met much criticism in this country. Apartheid is a repressive segregation system in which 23 million African blacks

are controlled by a group of five million whites. The white middle and upper class controls the majority of the wealth while the majority, the blacks, have to live in the Homelands in poor houses and wear poor clothing.⁹⁶ The plight of the black Africans is the topic of much post-modern music. In 'Biko,' Peter Gabriel protests the murder of an imprisoned black South African explaining that "the outside world is black and white with only one colour dead."⁹⁷ The Special A.K.A. call for the release of the imprisoned black leader in 'Free Nelson Mandela': "His body abused but his mind still free/Are you so blind that you cannot see?" Obviously written before his recent release, this is a passionate plea for the freedom of a prominent and active African leader.⁹⁸ In 'A Party,' Big Audio Dynamite is also vehemently against this system under which "masses (are) ruled by minority" and the conflicts are "machine guns against spear and bow." The division among the black tribes which hinders their bid for equality is also addressed: "I'd rally round the flag, but we got so many/I guess that's why you act like we ain't got any."⁹⁹

In America, there has been talk of economic boycott in order to try to bring this evil set-up to an end. Under Reagan, however, America has engaged in 'constructive engagement' which meant no public criticizing and no boycott and accomplished basically nothing. In 'Sun City,' the United Artists Against Apartheid reprimand Reagan for this method of non-intervention in the one country in which we should be exerting influence. In

this song, various musicians (some alternative, some not) argue that while our government does nothing, "people are dying and giving up hope/This quiet diplomacy ain't nothing but a joke."¹⁰⁰

Another area in which alternative music challenges American values and appeals to a radical subculture is religion. Overall, the United States is a very religious country, with Christianity being the dominant belief. According to pollsters, some 94 percent of respondents believe in God and 90 percent claim to be either Catholic, Protestant or Jewish.¹⁰¹ These figures are especially significant when compared to political participation. One poll indicates that 68 percent of the participants belong to a church while only three percent are affiliated with a specific political organization. In fact, in the same poll of eleven questions designed to compare religious and political interests, religion was dominant in every category.¹⁰²

As is the case with other American values, religion is questioned in some post-modern music. Depeche Mode's 'Blasphemous Rumours' tells the story of a suicidal girl who finds renewed hope in Christianity. Shortly after being born-again, however, she is hit by a car and dies. This causes the narrator to have the religious doubt expressed in the stinging chorus: "I think that God has a sick sense of humour and when I die I expect to find him laughing."¹⁰³ XTC also displays uncertainty about Christianity in 'Dear God.' This song is about a man who looks at the world's problems, such as war, poverty and disease, and decides that if God existed, He would fix things,

and consequently declares "The hurt I see helps to compound that Father, Son and Holy Ghost is just somebody's unholy hoax."

Religious conflict is reproached in this song as well: "See them fighting in the street/'Cause they can't make opinions meet about God."¹⁰⁴ Although hardly a fair argument against Christian faith, this song perhaps was aimed at fundamentalists and television evangelists with narrow views about religion.

The popularity of these T.V. preachers exemplifies both the vitality of religion in America and the gullibility of many Americans. Millions of viewers tune in to soul-savers such as Jerry Falwell and Oral Roberts and even donate money for their causes. Recently, Jim Bakker was exposed as a fraud, showing that not all of these evangelists use the donations to help spread the gospel. Unfortunately, however, these fundamentalists are still preaching "their message of selective scripture, free-enterprise economics, Christian meanness to the poor and foreign-policy chauvanism."¹⁰⁵

Not only does alternative music critique American society, reflecting the aforementioned issues and problems, but some artists also try to convince individuals that there is hope and that changes can be brought about by concerned, angry people. The Housemartins are especially adamant in their belief that the key to change is action from independent, free-thinking people. A particularly effective song by the Housemartins called 'Get up off our Knees' looks at the social inequality that exists ("some own pennies in a jar/some own oil tankers") and demands that the

working-class rise up against the affluent: "Don't wag your fingers at them and turn to walk away/Don't shoot someone tomorrow that you can shoot today."¹⁰⁶ Similarly, in 'These Days,' R.E.M. offers hope in bleak times: "We are concerned/We are hope despite the times."¹⁰⁷ Michael Stipe then admonishes people to act now in the revolutionary rhetoric of 'The Finest Worksong': "The time to rise has been engaged."¹⁰⁸ The Clash were also rebellious and revolutionary in their music. Although they were usually speaking to blue-collar workers and youths in England, their songs also affected the Americans in the left-wing subculture that listens to punk and alternative music. One song in particular is especially poignant: 'Working for the Clampdown.' This song talks about the corrupt ruling class and government that attempts to manipulate the lower-classes and convince youths that the system is a good one. The people in power have little to offer to the common factory workers, argues Joe Strummer urging the oppressed to "let fury have the hour, anger can be power, you know that you can use it." It is not enough to know that problems exist; individuals must believe that they can be heard and so that they can help alleviate problems and bring about change.

In going over all of these songs and interpreting the lyrics, one conclusion that can be drawn is how global most of the music is. Although some songs are specific to certain countries, most of the music can be applied to many nations.

Topics such as poverty, unemployment, racism and environmental concern are relevant to nearly every country in the world. So, for example, when an Australian musician sings about social inequality in his country, his music may affect British and American listeners as well as Australians. In addition, analyzing post-modern music reveals the global impact of the United States. Bands and artists from other countries in many cases show concern over things that America does, particularly concerning nuclear weapons and foreign intervention. We are living in a world where people are becoming more and more concerned about what is happening in other nations, and this is reflected in alternative music.

In addition, post-modern rock seems to suggest in the United States a continuity of ideology. That is to say, many of the ideas that were important in the 1950s are still around. After coming out of World War II as the strongest military and economic power in the world, the 1950s was a decade of American chauvinism and conspicuous consumption. Ideas prevalent in the 50s included monolithic communism, support of U.S. intervention, conformity and affluence. As we have seen, these are all things that have been criticized in the music of the 1980s, and this suggests that at least there are some similarities between the 80s and the 50s. R.E.M. makes a specific reference to the 1950s in 'Exhuming McCarthy.' This is referring to Wisconsin senator Joseph McCarthy who was an extreme conservative who claimed there were communist spies in the United States government and stirred up

much anti-Soviet feeling during the 1950s. Guitarist Peter Buck said in an interview that "it's the Eighties, and McCarthy's coming back so why not dig him up?"¹⁰⁹ Although certainly not similar in every respect, the 50s and McCarthyism resembles the 80s and the Reagan years in many ways and this shows the continuity that exists.

If alternative music indicates the continuing of the mentality of the 1950s, then it follows that the social and political commentary in today's music is reminiscent of the 1960s protest songs. With all of the tension and turmoil of the 60s, groups such as the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan and countless others wrote songs filled with social meaning. Their music supported civil rights and individuality while questioning the Vietnam War and middle-class values. It spoke to an active youth culture whose members wanted to 'make love, not war' and were distrustful of people over thirty, particularly those who held traditional, white, middle-class values. The music that has been examined in this paper affects a radical subculture in the United States in much the same way the 60s youth were moved by the music of that decade. If you look beyond the obvious differences, both types of music criticize perceived corrupt elements in American society and both call for individualism and change. Furthermore, both appeal to subcultures whose members are politically and socially conscious and can relate to what is being said in the music.

Alternative music critiques American society suggesting that

not all is well and good in the United States. Though it appeals mostly to a left-wing subculture with social concern, the messages in the music are important and should be heard by all. Things such as the increased danger of nuclear annihilation, the worsening of the environment, the perpetuation of poverty and social inequality along with the selfishness, apathy and conformity on the part of many Americans should cause us not to look back at the 1980s as a decade of prosperity and achievement but to look ahead to the 1990s as a decade of hope. Indeed, I hope that Americans will come to realize that the United States is not perfect and will become active and socially aware in order to deal with society's serious problems before it is too late for all of us.

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Alarm. "Absolute Reality." Stength. I.R.S., 1985.

This Welsh band plays folk-rock with socially conscious lyrics exhorting people to act.

Artists United Against Apartheid. "Sun City." Manhattan, 1985.

A combination of many respected musicians, this record was written as a protest against not only Apartheid but also artists such as Queen who did concerts in Sun City.

Big Audio Dynamite. "Bad" and "A Party." This is Big Audio Dynamite. CBS, 1985.

Headed by Mick Jones, formerly of the Clash, this reggae-influenced band writes songs relying on strong, catchy beats, much different than most of the Clash's guitar-oriented rock.

Camper Van Beethoven. "Sweethearts." Key Lime Pie. Virgin, 1989.

This group from California makes unusual music with a touch of folk and lyrics that are alternately funny or depressing.

Church, The. "Destination." Starfish. Arista, 1988.

Oblique lyrics and jangling, Byrdslike guitars characterize this Australian band who has just recently begun to be heard in America.

Clash, The. "Career Opportunities," "I'm so Bored with the USA," and "White Riot." The Clash. CBS, 1977.

The first album by this hugely important punk band included songs about topics such as violence, rebellion, and unemployment. Joe Strummer's often incomprehensible singing is set to scratching, screaming guitars on most of the tracks with a few reggae songs interspersed.

Clash, The. "Working for the Clampdown." London Calling. CBS, 1979.

This double album, perhaps the band's finest work, includes a variety of lyrical topics and musical styles, from the reggae of "Revolution Rock" to the bebop of "Jimmy Jazz" to the guitar riff of "Death or Glory."

Clash, The. Sandinista!. CBS, 1980.

This album has six sides of music, ranging from classic Clash to self-indulgent garbage, and is full of social and political concern.

Clash, The. "Armageddon Time." The Story of the Clash, Volume I. CBS, 1988.

This is a double album of the Clash's greatest hits, from their early punk to the more commercial songs of their later recordings.

Costello, Elvis. "What's so Funny 'Bout Peace, Love, and Understanding?" The Best of Elvis Costello and the Attractions. CBS, 1985.

Elvis Costello is one of the most important new wave artists and is still producing excellent music. This is a greatest hits that includes the best of his early work.

Costello, Elvis. "Peace in our Time." Goodbye Cruel World. Columbia, 1984.

Though not one of his stronger albums, it nevertheless includes several fine tracks, including the Cold War concern of "Peace in our Time."

Cure, The. "Jumping Someone Else's Train." Boys Don't Cry. Fiction, 1979.

This English band usually deals with gloom and despair painting a nihilistic picture of the world. On this, their first album, the subjects range from loneliness to war to hatred, including "Killing an Arab" (about l'Etranger by existentialist Albert Camus).

Depeche Mode. "Blasphemous Rumours," "Everything Counts," and "People are People." The Singles 81-85. Mute, 1985.

Relying almost entirely on synthesizers, Depeche Mode craft danceable songs with socially meaningful statements. This album includes their best early material and shows how the band has matured from techno-pop creations to haunting, intelligent songs.

Echo and the Bunnymen. "Never Stop" and "The Puppet." Songs to Learn and Sing. WEA, 1985.

Ringling guitars and pounding bass and drums compliment the surrealistic lyrics of lead singer Ian McCulloch on this 1985 compilation of this British band's best music.

Flesh for Lulu. "Decline and Fall." Plastic Fantastic. Beggars Banquet, 1989.

Metaphor after metaphor along with several references to decadent America make this a strong album.

Gabriel, Peter. "Biko." Peter Gabriel. Warner Bros., 1980.

Using innovative rhythms and electronics, this album is musically astounding and highly original, unlike his more recent offerings.

Housemartins, The. "Get up off our Knees," "Sheep," and "Sitting on a Fence." London O Hull 4. Go! Discs, 1986.

This socialist band from England deals primarily with political apathy and social concern in this fascinating album. Their message seems to be that people can and should make a difference in society.

Housemartins, The. "Bow Down" and "The People Who Grinned Themselves to Death." The People Who Grinned Themselves to Death. Go! Discs, 1987.

Much of the same is present on this, the next album, but

with a greater variety of topics covered (including religion, capitalist expansion and big business).

INXS. "Guns in the Sky." Kick. Atlantic, 1987.

Although they have moved increasingly toward the mainstream, this Australian band still makes some relevant and meaningful music.

Love and Rockets. "No New Tale to Tell." Earth, Sun, Moon. Big Time, 1987.

Using mostly acoustic guitar on this album, Love and Rockets put together several interesting songs with thought-provoking and sometimes curious lyrics.

Midnight Oil. "River Runs Red" and "Antarctica." Blue Sky Mining. Columbia, 1990.

This extremely political Australian band is especially concerned with environmental issues and the troubles of the working class on this, their most recent composition.

Midnight Oil. "The Dead Heart" and "Put Down That Weapon." Diesel and Dust. Columbia, 1988.

Peter Garrett, the colorful lead singer of this group, sings about the plight of Australian aborigines among other things on this record.

Morrissey. "Everyday is Like Sunday." Viva Hate. Sire, 1988.

Former lead singer of the Smiths, Morrissey deals with everything from Margaret Thatcher to gay isolation to nuclear annihilation on his solo debut.

Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark. "88 Seconds in Greensboro." Crush. Virgin, 1985.

Better known as OMD, this band uses a variety of musical influences to arrange rich, synthesizer-based music with lyrics about love and hate.

R.E.M. "Exhuming McCarthy" and "Finest Worksong." Document. IRS, 1987.

From Athens, Georgia, R.E.M. make intelligent guitar rock with a folk edge augmented by impressionistic lyrics. This album is harder than most of their others but is still excellent.

R.E.M. "Begin the Begin," "Cuyahoga," "Fall on Me," "Hyena," and "These Days." Lifes Rich Pageant. IRS, 1986.

The songs on this album range from environmental concern to apathy to nuclear fear.

Royal Crescent Mob. "Corporation Enema." Spin the World. Sire, 1989.

Four American college students created this album that has touches of rock, pop, blues and even rap with lyrics that are serious, funny or confusing.

Silencers, The. "God's Gift." A Letter From St. Paul. RCA, 1987.

This band plays well-crafted guitar rock with socially conscious lyrics.

Smiths, The. "Nowhere Fast." Meat is Murder. Rough Trade, 1985.

Lead singer Stephen Morrissey sings passionately about coming out, vegetarianism, and abusive school teachers among other things on this British band's third album.

Special A.K.A. "Free Nelson Mandela" and "Racist Friend." In the Studio. Chrysalis, 1984.

Infectious rhythms and political lyrics distinguish this ska band from Coventry, England.

Sting. "Russians." The Dream of the Blue Turtles. A&M, 1985.

After leaving the Police, Sting made this excellent, soul-influenced album filled with social commentary.

Talking Heads. "Blind," "The Democratic Circus," and "The Facts of Life." Naked. Sire, 1988.

One of the true new wave pioneers, David Byrne wrote African-influenced songs utilizing horns and percussion on this, their most recent album. The lyrics touch on topics such as conformity, apathy and the environment.

Talking Heads. "Making Flippy Floppy." Speaking in Tongues. Sire, 1983.

With the help of several guest artists, the Heads made one of their best albums that includes danceable songs with intricate rhythms.

UB40. "The Prisoner." UB44. International, 1982.

This reggae band writes catchy songs with bouncing bass and horns and often socially meaningful lyrics.

UB40. "One in Ten." Present Arms. International, 1981.

This album breaks away from the regular reggae dub style with limited success. Still, there are several strong tracks, including the sympathetic ode to the unemployed "One in Ten."

XTC. "Dear God." Skylarking. Virgin, 1986.

Their strongest album to date, 'Skylarking' has profound and evocative lyrics set to complex and well-structured music. This new wave band emerged in the late 70s and is still around.